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# Intertextual Dialogue and Humanization in David Simon's *The Corner*

Mikkel Jensen

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- 1 From the very beginning it is clear that the HBO miniseries *The Corner* is a political television series. Its first scene shows its director Charles S. Dutton standing against a wall in Western Baltimore talking about the prevalence of open air drug markets across major cities in America. This is, he tells us, “the information center of the neighborhood” but also “the place of death, of addiction or the suddenness of gunshots.” In Dutton’s words, *The Corner* is a story about “the men, women, and children living in the midst of the drug trade” whose “voices are too rarely heard” (episode one). By presenting this miniseries as a counter narrative to a media culture that has its focus elsewhere, the show offers its *raison d’être* in its examination of a group of marginalized people and the circumstances under which they live. Fearing a black backlash against *The Corner*’s depiction of African Americans, HBO wanted Dutton to direct the show and then also wanted Dutton to do this preamble “describing his reasons for making it.” Dutton, however, refused to speak the lines written by the show’s writers and consequently wrote and shot the scene himself (Scott).
- 2 It seems likely that viewers who find *The Corner* today do so by way of David Simon’s subsequent success with *The Wire*, *Treme* etc. But while these shows are being examined thoroughly by academia,<sup>1</sup> *The Corner* is often viewed as a mere “precursor” to *The Wire* (Nussbaum; Saner; Mendoza) due to the fact that Simon served as a showrunner on both shows and the fact that Ed Burns was involved in creating these stories.<sup>2</sup> This article, however, holds that this show is interesting to examine in its own right, also if we are to understand the common thread running through David Simon’s oeuvre. *The Corner* won three Emmys (best miniseries, directing for a miniseries, writing for miniseries) and a Peabody, yet only two monographs (Vest; Bigsby) and one PhD dissertation (Sweeney) devote entire chapters to this show, while several studies on *The Wire* discuss it as

secondary show to *The Wire*<sup>3</sup> and thus this article tries to shed light on the series that marks the start of David Simon's career writing and producing televisual content.<sup>4</sup>

- 3 *The Wire* caused quite a stir about how it presented Baltimore to the world and to actor/television Mike Rowe that show, along with *Homicide* (1993-1999) "convinced millions of Americans that Baltimore is a fantastic place to buy drugs, find a whore, or get murdered. Better yet... all three at once!" (Rowe). Simon, of course, rebutted Rowe's criticisms and he did so in a way that also speaks to the core ambition of what *The Corner* aimed to accomplish:

Mr. Rowe was clearly raising an argument that I find familiar and disturbing: That an undeserving portion of Baltimore has been chronicled at the expense of a Baltimore more deserving of attention, and that the America left behind by deindustrialization, poverty and the depredations of the drug war should just quiet the fuck down while we sell more of the America that has not been so marginalize. (Simon)

- 4 Simon's defense of *The Wire* thus aligns completely with Dutton's account of *The Corner*'s mission. To tell stories of a forgotten and overlooked part of society that they see the mainstream media not taking any strong interest in. Such paratexts make it clear why the creators of *The Corner* and *The Wire* feel there is a need to humanize the marginalized inner-city dwellers who face great challenges. *The Corner* does this by embracing both *realistic* and *melodramatic* modes in depicting a marginalized group. Its realist impulse comes to the fore in its way of stressing that the people shown on are screen are real people, while its melodramatic element shows itself in how the series attempts to engender emotions of sympathy in the viewer. *The Corner*'s political ambition thus aims at making viewers recalibrate their conceptualization of the people on screen: from "merely" being inner-city drug addicts to emerging as torn and ailing human beings. This off-the-beaten-path depiction of this marginalized group is essential to *The Corner*.
- 5 Befitting to its eye-level portrayal of drug afflicted Baltimoreans, the show opens with a handheld camera backtracking to follow protagonist Gary McCullough who is heading to a corner store. This opening shows how the miniseries is comfortable with a restricted scope that aims to understand and, crucially, to humanize these ailing and struggling people. This ambition is also forwarded in the show's title which suggests as much by conjuring a place-specific focus on a concrete, local setting (a corner), while also calling attention to a group of people who are driven into a metaphorical corner with few obvious outs. But though *The Corner* zooms in on a single West Baltimore corner, its attempt at humanizing its characters implicitly speaks to greater issues of how people not living in blighted inner-city neighborhoods think about "the corner." That fact is central to its politics, which tries to show the dignity, value, and humanity of its characters.
- 6 However, to say that *The Corner* is interested in humanizing its subjects is only a starting point and, hence, this article aims to examine both more closely *how* this humanization is brought forth as well as how this humanization becomes a political act in itself. It does so by showing how the miniseries' use of flashbacks offers the viewer insight into the life stories of the people in the show. In doing so, the viewer is shown how one should not take the situation on screen as a given; by presenting the current state of the characters on screen as a result of longer societal and personal backstories *The Corner* stresses that the current situation is a consequence of developments in the past. By showing this decline, the miniseries tries to avoid letting the viewer think that what s/he is seeing on screen is to be taken as a given; *The Corner* tries to historicize its portrayal of this

Baltimore neighborhood. Gary's descent into drug addiction affords us with a narrative understanding of his life that is different from understanding him only as the man he is in the present day of *The Corner*.

- 7 Similarly, the series engages with other depictions of the African American inner-city underclass in an intertextual dialogue. Here, this article employs intellectual historian Quentin Skinner's "pro-intertextualist methodology" (Skinner in Pallares-Burke 236) in trying to make clear how *The Corner* uses intertextuality—specifically through references to John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991)—as a way of steering clear of other ways of depicting urban ills. The article also takes a look at how *The Corner* sustains a sense of realism by inserting its director, Charles S. Dutton, in dialogue with the fictionalized versions of the people portrayed in this miniseries. Finally, the article discusses how *The Corner*'s humanization is contingent on both realism and melodrama. To film scholar Linda Williams, melodrama "is the fundamental mode of popular American moving pictures" that "is structured upon the "dual recognition" of how things are and how they should be" (Williams 42 & 48) and this article argues that *The Corner* embraces both realism and melodrama in forwarding its societal critique.
- 8 *The Corner* follows Gary McCullough's (T.K. Carter) insistent attempts to get enough money to buy drugs in order to sustain his addiction. Gary had studied for a year in college (Ohio State) but dropped out when he learned that his girlfriend, Fran (Khandi Alexander), had become pregnant. He nonetheless built a successful career and was able to provide for his family in a way that allowed them to move out of the city center to a middle-class suburb. He and his wife nevertheless ended up addicted to drugs in the years of the "crack epidemic" in the US (early 1980s–early 1990s). Gary's teenage son, DeAndre (Sean Nelson), on the other hand, sells drugs while trying to get promoted to the 10<sup>th</sup> grade or get a job. DeAndre also helps his mother sustain her use of drugs. However, while Gary does get a (seasonal) job, DeAndre gets his 15-year-old girlfriend Tyreeka (Toy Connor) pregnant and tries to get and hold down a job at fast food restaurant but it is the mother of the family, Fran, who offers the positive counterpoint to this story as she, in the end, manages to go into detox and stay clean. Each episode of the miniseries is bookended by fictionalized interview sequences focusing on the person that the episode revolves around, e.g. episode two is titled "DeAndre's Blues" and begins with an interview with DeAndre and ends with an interview with the social worker Miss Ella (Tyra Ferrell) who talks about her work with teenagers in the community. The final moments of the last episode of the series features an interview with the real people behind the characters in the series, among others Fran and DeAndre. The six-episode series ends with Gary dying from an overdose in his parents' basement and DeAndre becoming addicted to drugs.

## 1. The Contingency of the Present

- 9 Intellectual historian Frank Beck Lassen argues that making the present strange is at the heart of the function and use of intellectual history. Seeing the present world as a result of past choices and developments and learning of the paths-not-taken in historical change can make people see the world as more contingent than they might otherwise think (13). *The Corner*'s liberal use of flashbacks—one of the miniseries' more noticeable stylistic choices—mirrors this emphasis on the contingency of the present. The first flashback occurs just eleven minutes into its first episode where Gary McCullough is walking down a street and looks over to a store where he worked as a child. The color

scheme clearly demonstrates a contrast between a bleak present and a, literally and metaphorically, more colorful past:



A child in the present day and Gary as a child in front of the same store.

- 10 The contrast in colors can be interpreted both as the show signaling how things have actually deteriorated in this area since Gary was a child, but it can also be understood as

Gary's romanticization of a past whose appeal seems exaggerated in hindsight, or, as Sheamus Sweeney puts it, "suggest[s] the compensatory perfection of fading memory" (131). The viewer, of course, can understand it in either way or as both at the same time. Regardless, this establishes what Jason Mittell terms an *intrinsic norm* for the show as it teaches viewers how to watch the show and informs them of what to expect of subsequent episodes (168) where this technique is used to both look at Gary's backstory as well as the bigger picture of this Western Baltimore community. Through these flashbacks, *The Corner* historicizes its portrayal of rampant drug use in inner-city neighborhoods and Vest argues that the direction and production design makes the viewer "viscerally" experience the contrast between past and present" (128).

- 11 Dutton, however, had initially been reluctant about using flashbacks, believing that only three percent of them work; "The other 97 percent don't" as he told a journalist in 2000 (Scott). Dutton's point here seems focused on the aesthetics of flashbacks; do they "work" or not? Regardless of whether one agrees with Dutton's assessment, the *The Corner's* political argument would be reduced if it hadn't included the flashbacks for without those the show would be barred from showing the historical change in the neighborhood and it would only be able to show the characters in their present state. In that case, we wouldn't learn of how Gary had once been on a better path and that this current state is the result of a catastrophic detour from the path he otherwise had been on. The contingency, in other words, of Gary's present state would fall away without the flashbacks.
- 12 But while this technique offers an inkling of how far these characters have fallen from their previously well-sorted lives, it also sets up one of the pivotal scenes of the miniseries which hinges on the use of flashbacks. Because the viewer has come to expect flashbacks—as an "intrinsic norm"—this instance does not stand out as an unexpected break with the show's overall aesthetics. The scene in question is at the very end of the series. Gary is overdosing in his parents' basement to the tunes of The Impressions' song "People Get Ready," which is one of the more political songs Curtis Mayfield wrote which underlines a political undertone to Gary's demise.
- 13 In the last scene of *The Corner's* first episode, Gary helps DeAndre and his friend R.C. (Corey Parker Robinson) put up a basketball hoop. DeAndre and Gary do not have a lot to do with each other due to the father's addiction, but to the viewer this potentially appears to be a rare moment of bonding between father and son. That hope, however, is immediately crushed when Ronnie (Tasha Smith), Gary's girlfriend, shows up and offers drugs to Gary. Before this Gary had taken a single shot and talked a bit with DeAndre and R.C.. DeAndre and Gary had even agreed to play a match against each other but Gary leaves with Ronnie and does not play the game that he had just promised to play with DeAndre. In the flashback sequence, when Gary is overdosing in the basement of his parents' house, however, the flashback shows Gary taking that one shot and through the use of longer close-ups, and a shot reverse shot that makes it look like Gary and DeAndre are looking at each other rather intensely this flashback suggests how Gary's relationship with his son is one of the most important things in his life. This flashback is thus filled with a sense of missed opportunity and regret that Gary chose to do drugs instead of spending time with his son and, consequently, this scene shows how Gary failed at this point. His decision is, surely, prompted by his addiction but it is important to note that Gary does not even postpone doing drugs. When Ronnie offers him drugs he abandons DeAndre without even playing basketball with him just for a short while. So by thematizing missed opportunity and regret, this flashback thus aims at producing an



emotional effect in the viewer. In that sense, *The Corner* both engages with Gary's responsibility, the importance of the parent-child relationship and it does so through the sadness of Gary's death.

- 14 This scene arguably features the series' strongest use of pathos, which is underlined through editing, music, and flashbacks. The fact that "People Get Ready" is playing on the radio, however, adds a sense of tragic irony; Gary's life is over and there is nothing to "get ready for" and by inviting the viewer to feel sympathy for Gary that song's political layers add a political subtext to Gary's death. But it is not only through the use of diegetic music that *The Corner* engages with other texts in American cultural history; intertextuality plays an important role in the way it engages in dialogue with its cultural context.

## 2. Interlocutors and Intertextual Dialogues

- 15 *The Corner's* realist impulse is unmissable and although intertextuality is often associated with postmodern fictions (somewhat at odds with the mode of realism), the series uses this device to engage in a cultural dialogue with other texts. Media scholar Erlend Lavik argues that there are two traditions of discussing intertextuality; one is associated with Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva who "sought to bring to light the plurality of texts within any given text." To Lavik, Barthes and Kristeva's work on intertextuality "was not simply descriptive, however, but overtly political" as it "sought to 'liberate' readers by challenging notions of textual bounded-ness, originality and interpretive certainty." The other tradition Lavik points out, however, sees "intertextuality as a deliberate textual strategy" which encompasses "artistic procedures like allusion and quotation" ("The Poetics and Rhetoric" 55-56). Whereas Barthes and Kristeva's work saw intertextuality as a general state of affairs, the latter approach considers intertextuality to be a more concrete textual feature which some texts make use of and like Lavik's examination of intertextuality in *The Wire*, I embrace the latter use of the term. In this vein, Anker Gemzøe usefully notes intertextual references connect specific texts to more general trends in media history (Gemzøe).
- 16 In the first episode, Gary is in his parents' basement reading about chemistry while a radio call-show in the background program discusses racism in the US. A caller introduced as "James from Essex" (who sounds very much like David Simon) says:
- 'Yeah, I wanna comment on what that other caller said earlier. I mean all this crap about slavery and racism and all that be responsible for people who don't wanna work I just think that's a bunch of junk. You know what I mean? You don't hear Italian people or Irish people complain. And they was treated real bad when they got to this country. I mean when are we gonna stop hearing about racism? I mean slavery was more than a hundred years ago. [Indistinct due to diegetic sound effects]... nobody take no drugs. They just do that to themselves.' (episode one)
- 17 This caller represents a key interlocutor for *The Corner* as this miniseries criticizes the dismissal of the historical record in explaining or dealing with current issues regarding race in the US. *The Corner's* liberal use of flashbacks can thus be seen as being rooted in a belief in the necessity of understanding of the problems in inner-city areas in the US in a historical, diachronic perspective. The flashbacks explain the current situation depicted on screen as a consequence of past developments and is thus a rebuttal of the sentiment expressed by the caller on this radio show. According to sociologist William Julius Wilson, conservatives "tend to stress the importance of values, attitudes, habits, and styles in



explaining different experiences, behavior, and outcomes of groups. According to this view, group differences are reflected in the culture" (Wilson xiv), and seeing how the caller directly attacks the notion that structural and historical forms of racism are adequate explanations for current social problems in American ghettos the caller expresses a traditional conservative sentiment. *The Corner* thus rebuts conservative ideas about inner-city residents and discourses of alleged racism.

- 18 Interestingly, however, the above monologue also functions as a sound bridge between the viewer seeing Gary doing drugs in the basement of his parents' house and a long shot from outside on the street where Gary's father is parking his taxi outside his home after what the viewer soon after learns—through dialogue between Gary and his father—was a very long shift. *The Corner* thus plays on one of the constitutive elements of audiovisual media, the dual information tracks of sound and visuals (Allrath et al. 2) in that the visuals and accompanying dialogue rebut the caller's comments that the sound side offers. As Gary is shown reading chemistry books while intoxicated, the visual expression in this scene—characteristically for the whole series—argues against the caller on the radio show. In this way, the series points out a discursive context and a fictionalized interlocutor with which it engages. It is thus clear how we may understand *The Corner* not just as a political utterance, but a *political utterance that is directed at certain interlocutors* that it itself points out.
- 19 This aligns well with how intellectual historian Quentin Skinner argues that texts do not just mean things; they do things in their context and texts are thus seen as intervening arguments in existing debates in a cultural landscape. Skinner argues that the critic cannot understand what texts "are doing, whether they are satirizing, repudiating, ridiculing, ignoring, accepting other points of view" (Skinner in Pallares-Burke 219). Seen in this way, *The Corner* addresses its interlocutor and acknowledges then-current discussions in order to engage with those discussions head-on. Skinner argues that writers, or "ideologists" in his terminology, need to "march backward into battle" in order to make their criticisms credible in the political vernacular of the era that a text is produced (Skinner 295). Mikkell Thorup and Frank Lassen explain this as a balance act that the "ideologist" maintains by "using a language that respects the linguistic conventions and thus makes the issue recognizable, while the text systematically works to rework or reinterpret how this issue is evaluated" (Lassen and Thorup 33). In other words, the critical writer needs to play on the existing field even if that critic wants to change the rules of the game. This snippet of dialogue on the radio thus serves as *The Corner*'s way of pointing out its interlocutors that it seeks to engage with and rebut. Through Skinner's "pro-intertextualist methodology" one can also see how *The Corner* engages with a certain subgenre in 1990s film history; the "hood film" and this also opens up for a contextual understanding of how *The Corner* tries to represent inner-city issues in a way that—while certainly sharing some features with the hood film—tries to avoid some of the choices that the hood film had embraced.
- 20 Seeing as *The Corner* was the first television serial since *Roots* (1977) to feature "a majority black cast" (Williams 2014, 44),<sup>5</sup> it has something of a privileged position in terms of engaging in a cultural dialogue about how the depiction of African Americans on television and in film. (*The Corner* refers to itself as a "film.") It engages in such a dialogue through key intertextual allusions to John Singleton's 1991 "hood film" *Boyz n the Hood*. "Hood films" refer to those early 1990s African American films which featured a "strong connection to youth rap/hip hop culture (via soundtrack and rappers-turned-actors),

contemporary urban settings (primarily black communities in Los Angeles or New York), and inner-city social and political issues such as poverty, crime, racism, drugs, and violence.” *Boyz n the Hood* and *Menace II Society* (1993) are the most well-known and successful films in the genre (deWaard 59). *The Corner* thus points out one of the central films in this genre in order to engage with the cultural politics of this genre more broadly.

- 21 In *The Corner*’s third episode, DeAndre is watching this film with his girlfriend Tyreeka and in Dutton’s opening interview of episode five with DeAndre, Dutton asks DeAndre why he and his friends call their basketball team the “Crenshaw Mafia Brothers” pointing to how “Crenshaw is a boulevard in Los Angeles.” DeAndre merely replies: “Saw *Boyz n the Hood*. Got it from there.” Later on, this name’s acronym, CMB, also becomes the name of DeAndre’s and his friends’ “gang” when they start selling drugs, suggesting how fascinated they are with the urban setting depicted in Singleton’s film. In this way *The Corner* discusses how representations of inner-city ills—in an unproductive way—can be perceived as fascinating portrayals even though a film like *Boyz n the Hood* is overtly political and instructional in wanting to “Increase the Peace” as the film’s closing intertitle reads.



After the end of *Boyz n the Hood*, this message appears just before the credits start rolling.

- 22 The last scene of Singleton’s film features two of its main characters, Tre Styles (Cuba Gooding Jr.) and Darrin “Doughboy” Baker (Ice Cube), sitting on a porch talking about how the news media that morning didn’t cover how Doughboy’s brother Ricky (Morris Chestnut) had been killed the day before. Doughboy says “Either they don’t know, don’t show, or don’t care about what’s going on in the hood. They had all this foreign shit. They didn’t have shit on my brother, man” (*Boyz n the Hood*). According to Andrew deWaard, the film engages in the mode of melodrama and notes that these lines are “the film’s key piece of dialogue” and is both an “incendiary critique and induction of pathos” (60). This scene thus parallels Charles Dutton’s opening monologue where he presents *The Corner* as a story about people whose “voices are too rarely heard.”<sup>6</sup> As this miniseries is based on David Simon and Ed Burns’ experiences in Baltimore in 1993 it is fully believable that they

would watch *Boyz n the Hood* (as that film had only come out two years before), but it does seem that *The Corner* opts for a different way of portraying inner-city life and the miniseries thus uses these intertextual references to engage with Singleton's film. So while both *The Corner* and *Boyz n the Hood* sympathize with the African American underclass in inner-city neighborhoods, *The Corner* emphasizes that its project of humanizing this group of people is performed in a different way than was the case in the hood films of the early 1990s.

- 23 An important difference between *The Corner* and *Boyz n the Hood* is how shootings are portrayed. In *Boyz n the Hood*, shootings are placed at key dramatic junctures that imbue these shootings with a dramatic importance and gravitas. As these key dramatic scenes are scenes of violence, violence comes to stand at the center of attention of a film which otherwise wishes to forward an agenda of non-violence. *The Corner* features one shooting and it is interesting to note that the sense of drama that accompanies violence in *Boyz n the Hood* is all but absent from *The Corner*'s shooting scene. *The Corner*'s sole shooting scene is presented as being completely disorienting to the viewer in a way that avoids imbuing it with the same degree of dramatic tension and centrality that is characteristic of *Boyz n the Hood* and hood movies in general. It is not even clear to the viewer that somebody is really trying to shoot at DeAndre and his friends. They nevertheless run around scared and shoot guns while looking the other way. Shot and edited in a way that confuses the viewer, this scene can hardly be said to romanticize "gangster" behavior in any way but in the ensuing scene DeAndre and his friends are nevertheless standing on a corner boasting about how cool they were and how dramatic that shoot-out was to them and here the viewer sees a distinct discrepancy between how s/he experienced the confusing shooting scene and how the young boys talk about it (episode five). One could argue that they—the Crenshaw Mafia Brothers as they call themselves—see their experiences through the lens of hood films like *Boyz n the Hood*, and *The Corner* suggests that that form of thinking is not helpful in these children's lives. *The Corner* wants to avoid imbuing shooting scenes with the same drama that the early 1990s hood films did. *The Corner* instead lingers on the pain that murder victims' relatives feel.
- 24 When the community activist/social worker Miss Ella (Tyra Ferrell) is making a memorial for a citizen who had been shot the previous year, she invites DeAndre and his friends to help out. It turns out that the person who had been killed was the uncle of one of DeAndre's friends and therefore he and one of the other friends choose to help out but it does not take long before these two friends have spelled out CMB with rocks in the dirt and start rapping "Get your guns out/Get your guns out!" They do this in a playful and childlike manner that reveals the childish nature of their fascination with gang culture and guns they know from media texts and through this scene *The Corner* points out how this fascination may play an unproductive point of reference for these children. Miss Ella, whom the teenagers know from a community recreation center where they spend some of their afternoons and also throw parties at, thus stands as an important counterbalance to the other influences in the children's lives that are not as strong and positive as she is. It is later revealed that—without Miss Ella's knowing—that the memorial is also to be dedicated to Miss Ella's daughter who had been killed a few years earlier (episode six). The inclusion of Miss Ella's storyline is thus important in relation to showing the loss that accompanies violence and killings but also in terms of representational politics; of showing the forces for good that exist in inner cities so *The Corner* would not be accused of painting an overly bleak picture of the situation.<sup>7</sup>

- 25 As *The Corner*'s shooting scene is devoid of the drama and suspense of the ones featured in *Boyz n the Hood* that it references several times, the miniseries thus uses Singleton's debut movie as a contrastive frame of reference of how it does and does not portray an inner-city environment marked by drug dealing. One should, however, not overstate the differences between *The Corner* and *Boyz n the Hood*. They share a core ethos but *The Corner* discusses whether the aesthetics that *Boyz n the Hood* adopts is fully helpful in dealing with these issues in the most constructive way. DeAndre and Dutton discuss the situation in this West Baltimore neighborhood and DeAndre explains that "Niggers be dying." Dutton replies "You don't think you're being a little melodramatic?" to which DeAndre shrugs. The fact that Dutton asks DeAndre this question is the show's way of trying to preempt viewers' "accusations" or reservations about the show's alleged "melodrama." Indeed, from the late nineteenth century there has been a tendency to see realism and melodrama as distinct categories, seeing the latter as "an outdated and embarrassingly crude approach to the problem of artistic mimesis" (Kelleter and Mayer 10). In this vein, melodrama is a pejorative concept "associated with cheap effects, quick entertainment, and distraction from weighty moral questions" but several scholars have revised the term so that it is discussed as a serious and pervasive mode of storytelling which lends itself "to enactments of socio-cultural processes of marginalization" which, in the US, often has a racial element to it (Kelleter and Mayer 7, 9). However, while scholars have revised their usage of the term, DeAndre's shrug at Dutton's comment about him maybe being melodramatic makes Dutton explain the concept as "overly dramatic to make a point" revealing that Dutton uses the term in its "old" usage as if the melodramatic mode undercuts DeAndre's attempts at conveying the realities of living in his neighborhood.
- 26 Thomas Postlewait, however, argues that we should not see melodrama and realism in dichotomies where "melodrama distorts, realism reports; melodrama offers escapism, realism offers life; melodrama is conservative, realism is radical; melodrama delivers ideologies (as false consciousness), realism deconstructs ideologies." To Postlewait "both melodrama and realism distort and report, conserve and criticize. And both articulate and challenge ideologies of the time" (56). Understanding *The Corner*'s use of realism and melodrama in this tradition is thus able to account for its dual emphasis on the reality of its subject matter and its simultaneous embrace of pathos. In this way, the show offers a form of self-aware metafictional commentary in an otherwise realist vernacular. This scene anticipates how *The Corner* might be received, maybe as "overly dramatic to make a point." DeAndre, however, gets angry at Dutton saying "I'm saying niggers be thinking this a game. This shit is for real." Read in these metafictional terms, DeAndre's anger here is *The Corner*'s anger; this is *The Corner* objecting to the notion that its elements of emotionality and "melodrama" are textual constructs imposed on its real-life subject matter. The self-reflexiveness in the dialogue between Dutton and DeAndre thus speaks to the subject matter of the series and how that subject is presented.
- 27 *The Corner* thus suggests that this melodramatic element is part of its realist impulse. In this sense, DeAndre's line that "[t]his shit is for real" is a spelled-out statement of the series' poetological approach that rejects the notion that some (viewers) might simply see the miniseries as a (textual) play/"game." For *The Corner* it is important to preempt the objections that critics might raise about its depiction of the situation in Western Baltimore. Seen in the light of Skinner's ideas of textual direction, *The Corner* wards off "accusations" of sentimentality which might be acutely important considering how the

series has its chief interest in humanizing a marginalized and (in *The Corner's* view) misrepresented group of people.

### 3. Humanization and Dehumanization

- 28 One of the clearest ways that *The Corner* signposts its commitment to realism is how each episode opens with an intertitle reading "True Stories" followed by a talking heads style interview that resembles journalistic television. It, however, also embraces melodrama as its politics lies in its appeal to its viewers' sympathy for Gary and its other characters. T.K. Carter's portrayal of Gary is highly convincing—to me, at least—and his work in the show plays a large part in fleshing out the miniseries' ambition about humanizing drug addicts. As mentioned, Linda Williams considers melodrama to be "structured upon the "dual recognition" of how things are and how they should be" (Williams, "Melodrama Revisited" 48) which *The Corner's* embraces in its portrayal of Gary and the others. In Dutton's interview with Fran, Gary's wife, she describes how she "first started messing with heroin when [her] sister Darlene died. She got burned up in a fire." At her sister's funeral, Fran was offered drugs which she accepted as a way of coping with her loss. The dealer came back the next day, but after that Fran was hooked and had to go find drugs herself (episode three). That sort of predatory behavior surely puts Fran's addiction in a new light. Williams argues that "[i]f emotional and moral registers are sounded, if a work invites us to feel sympathy for the virtues of beset victims, if the narrative trajectory is ultimately more concerned with a retrieval and staging of innocence than with the psychological causes of motives and action, then the operative mode is melodrama" ("Melodrama Revisited" 42). Williams' words thus explain how *The Corner's* melodrama works as this scene shows how a person's predatory behavior got to Fran in her most fragile state, making the miniseries "[invite] us to feel sympathy for" and, in turn, "judge" her less harshly. Her addiction is at least not only her own fault.
- 29 In the fourth episode Gary goes to see Spielberg's 1993 historical epic *Schindler's List* in a different part of Baltimore, which furthers *The Corner's* discussion of how its aesthetic form of blending realism and melodrama is connected to its political ambition of humanizing its protagonists. Later that day, while shooting up with Fat Curt (Clarke Peters) and other drug addicts, Gary, clearly inspired by having seen *Schindler's List*, talks about the Nazi dehumanization of the Jews during the 1930s and 1940s: "They couldn't see them as anything better than rats or bugs," Gary says to which Rita (Robin Michelle McClamb) responds that "That sound like a miserable-ass movie." Gary replies, "Yeah, but it was real, all right?" suggesting that the "miserable" content of *Schindler's List* (and, by extension, *The Corner*) is rooted in its veracity. This piece of dialogue thus furthers the miniseries' warding off of accusations of being melodramatic (in the old/pejorative sense of the word) and emphasizes that this is (also) real(ism). The few scenes where Gary is in another part of Baltimore are decidedly more colorful than the present-day scenes from Western Baltimore and thus suggest how the people at the focus of this show live in a separate reality divorced from the harbor adjacent setting that looks much more hospitable. While on the east side of Baltimore, Gary is listening to The O'Jays song "Livin' for the Weekend" on a Walkman which contains the lines "You might see me on the east side/Ha, the west side/I'm even going cross the bridge/ 'Cause I, 'cause I, 'cause I hear/ They really get down over there." The visual expression and the diegetic music thus conjure the sense of a divided public space in Baltimore. This visual expression thus



underscores Gary's comments about how one group of people is separated from the thriving mainstream of American society and *The Corner* argues that this spatial isolation is the prerequisite for the harmful othering of the inner city drug afflicted citizens.



**Gary in sunny East Baltimore and Blue (Glenn Plummer) on his way to rehab in a less sunlit scene in West Baltimore.**

- 30 It that sense, this scene—along with the scene where Dutton interviews DeAndre in the store—offers the miniseries' poetological statement. Referring to the dehumanization of Jews during the 1930s and 1940s, Gary says that "it's happening again" (episode four). It is completely suiting to Gary—a man shown to have a strong interest in abstract thought—that he utters these thoughts but one could argue that it is important that Gary makes the connection explicit. Had Gary not made the connection explicit the series might accused of being hyperbolic by merely suggesting the link between one form of dehumanization (in Germany) and another (in the US). Spelling out this comparison within the diegesis also makes clear that the dehumanization of drug addicts is the discourse that *The Corner* objects to and the miniseries implicitly suggests that its strategy is to humanize its characters. That is its political mission and I believe that its aesthetics underpin that ambition successfully. This also reveals how we are to understand the project of humanization in *The Corner*. It is a *discursive* phenomenon that has to do with how a lot of people perceive a certain group of people; "They couldn't see them as anything better than rats or bugs," as Gary says. *The Corner's* chief political interest in the humanization of the drug addicted and impoverished humans living in derelict neighborhoods is thus a politics that has more to do with perceptions and sympathies rather than concrete policy measures. Erlend Lavik argues that the politics of *The Wire* do not come in the form of policy initiatives and concrete plans of societal change: "*The Wire* does not gradually present a chain of argument with well-defined premises and claims. The series rather creates a complicated network of ideologically and emotionally charged connotations without describing in any detailed fashion the important connections between them" (Lavik, *The Wire* 225). This is in line with how Williams argues that "the most crucial element of the study of melodrama" is "its capacity to generate emotion in audiences" ("*Melodrama Revisited*" 44).
- 31 That capacity, however, also has to do with the amount of screen time devoted to Gary and the other characters. For *The Corner's* project of humanization relies both on what film theorist Murray Smith calls *structures of sympathy* and the fact that it shows drug addicts, especially Gary, to be conscientious people. Sheamus Sweeney argues that when drug addicts appeared on the television series *Homicide* (1993-1999) "they were lacking agency, usually witnesses to a crime and desperate for a fix" (Sweeney 122) which is a striking contrast to *The Corner's* focus on Gary and his family. Gary is no bystander in a larger plotline about, say, a murder investigation which means that he and his family is the crux of the story.
- 32 To Murray Smith, viewers can become *aligned* with certain characters through either *spatio-temporal attachment* or *subjective access* (83); i.e. how much screen time is devoted to a character and how much insight viewers get through devices like voice-over etc. The large amount of screen time devoted to Gary (including interviews with him and the interviews of which he becomes the topic of conversation), aligns the viewer with him in a way you do not see in many other depictions of addicts and that textual fact opens up the possibility that the viewer does not judge Gary's addiction right off the bat. We simply see more nuances in Gary because we see him in many different situations like when he is at work and when he muses over the callous attitudes he encounters in his community. In some cases, however, *alignment* can lead to *allegiance*, which according to Smith has to do



with the viewer's extending of his/her sympathy to characters but has to do with the moral evaluations the viewer makes of the character's behavior and actions. (84). Smith argues that the term "identification"—for the viewer's emotional engagement with characters—is misleading. Identification suggests that the viewer mimics what the character is feeling. Bordwell is on point: "We might pity a grieving widow, but she isn't feeling pity, she's feeling grief" (n.p.). Smith's term allegiance, then, shows how viewers can sympathize with characters like Gary and Fran without suggesting that we feel what they are feeling and through this terminology we can understand how *The Corner* is able to align its viewers with Gary and, quite possibly, create allegiance with him. Through the time spent with him, the morality he displays, and how he is shown to be less callous than some of the people around him the viewer is invited to sympathize with Gary.<sup>8</sup>

- 33 This formal choice is thus directly interrelated to the politics of humanization that is at the heart of *The Corner*. With allegiance having to do with the viewer's "moral evaluation of characters" it is important the viewer sees Gary trying to stop his wife's—and, by extension, his and DeAndre's—descent into addiction. These scenes therefore provide the viewer with important information that can well affect the viewer's moral evaluation of him. We know how he fought and how he tried to avoid drugs for a long time. This focus on Gary is central to *The Corner*'s overall ambition, which, however, is further underscored by the series' use of flashbacks and its use of interviews.
- 34 *The Wire* thus harnesses the appeal of melodrama in creating structures of sympathy with characters in certain situations, and that form of politics is also present in *The Corner*. Its politics lies not in saying what should be done to change the situation that it portrays but in engendering a wish for change in the viewers by arousing their indignation; it is a counter narrative to those stories in the media culture that discursively reduce the humanity of inner-city dwellers and especially drug addicts. Soon after its release, Janny Scott commented in *The New York Times* that *The Corner* "had shown black inner-city drug addicts as complex and startlingly human" (Scott). Her comment about drug addicts coming across as "startlingly human" surely does not come from her being surprised that people with addictions are human, but is rather motivated by how much *The Corner*'s portrayal of addicts veers away from the standard way of depicting addicts.
- 35 As *The Corner* is based on the real people that Simon and Burns followed around in 1993, the viewer very much has a hard time dismissing this sympathetic portrayal of Gary as a mere textual construct. Though Gary at times overlooks his own complicity in morally dubious behavior (as Vest argues), he is morally aware of the ethical and social implications of his and other people's interactions. It is a chase for money and for drugs—but a chase that challenges Gary's sense of ethics—even though he really does not want to see it that way. This is particularly poignant in Dutton's opening interview with Gary in episode four. Dutton mentions the books he sees lying around: "You got a library down here I see. James Baldwin, Thoreau, Elie Wiesel. *A History of God*. What's that about?" Gary: "Oh yeah, that's Judaism, Islam, Christianity. It's like it's three paths to the same god" explaining that he, when high, "[tries] to educate [him]self." This surely represents a very untraditional depiction of drug addicts in popular culture. It adds layers to the characterization of Gary and stresses the fact that his addiction does not nullify his individuality, which clearly is a representational point in itself. In episode two, Fran has kicked out DeAndre for selling drugs, which has made him move into their former (now abandoned) house. Knowing that his son is holding drugs, Gary sneaks in to steal from him but sees his son having sex with his girlfriend, Tyreeka.



**Gary learning that his son is making his own life experiences.**

- <sup>36</sup> The interesting thing here is how though Gary is stealing from his son we see him briefly nodding with a slight smile on his face before his face turns back to a more sad expression. In this short glimpse, we see the father—not the drug addict stealing from his son—being glad to learn DeAndre growing up making his own life experiences (episode two). The scene embodies the overall aim of *The Corner*; to see the man before seeing his addiction.

## 4. Exit

- <sup>37</sup> *The Corner* maintains a strict ethos of neither pitying nor passing judgment on its characters and though it has a chief interest in humanizing Gary, Fran, DeAndre and its other characters, the show does not shy away from showing how these fictionalized renditions of real people, especially Gary, make some poor choices in their lives. A part of the show's humanization is to meet its characters eye to eye. It does not make excuses for them. As Vest points out, *The Corner*
- refuses the drug-addict-as-unwitting-victim trope that *Hill Street Blues*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Homicide* indulge to illustrate that Gary's problems are at least partly his own fault. The miniseries, however, refutes the drug-addict-as-unsympathetic-criminal trope that cop dramas more frequently portray to demonstrate Gary's inherent goodness even as he commits larceny. (129)
- <sup>38</sup> Vest is not inspired by Skinner, but by noting how he argues that *The Corner* “refuses” and “refutes” other ways of depicting drug addicts, his understanding of textual agency aligns well with Skinner's intertextual methodology. The point of *The Corner*'s evaluative depiction of Gary is that he is presented as a person before he is presented as a drug addict for, as Vest notes, it is indeed rare to see drug addicts as the core protagonists of

televisual fictions and the very approach of focusing on a drug addict allows for a different portrayal of drug addicts and drug addiction compared to, say, many police procedurals where drug addicts might be cast in minor roles of victims of crimes or as witnesses to them. Indeed, one of the things that attracted Dutton to Simon's and Mills' script was that "it was told from the addicts' perspective, not some glamorized dealer's" (Scott).

- 39 In their 1997 book, Simon and Burns wrote that "[i]n the empty heart of our cities, the culture of drugs has created a wealth-generating structure so elemental and enduring that it can legitimately be called a social compact" (Simon and Burns 68). Such a structural critique is not very clear in the adapted miniseries which instead chose to zero in on the human consequences of this "enduring social compact" but not its economic and structural underpinnings. *The Wire* would later revisit that agenda of humanizing black inner-city drug addicts but would do so in a way that also ponders the structural issues that this misery exists within. Having a core interest in explaining how the war on drugs can perpetuate itself across decades, this serial was able to offer a "systemic" outlook (Kinder), revisiting some of the more structural and societal points found in Burns' and Simon's 1997 book. *The Wire* foregrounds the social reproduction of social ills and is therefore arguably a depiction of urban ills that shows that things stay the same (Jensen); in this sense *The Wire* is able to pick up on the "social compact" that Burns and Simon's commented on but which fell away in the HBO miniseries. *The Corner* also suggests that the situation portrayed is a situation that is allowed to endure but its focus lies in its realist and melodramatic way of trying to make its viewers see Gary and the other characters as people with addictions rather than as mere addicts. And in its efforts to engage in a public dialogue about these issues, this miniseries points out key interlocutors and tries to engage in a public conversation about the situation in the impoverished ghettos of the US. *The Corner's* humanization is thus a political act achieved through realism, melodrama and pathos.
- 40 Humanization is here understood as portraying drug addicts on screen as people, and not as "see them as anything better than rats or bugs" in Gary's words. Humanization is a discursive phenomenon—directed at key interlocutors—that is employed for political purposes in an effort to not let the viewer accept a media picture of inner-city problems that diminishes the humanity of inner-city dwellers. *The Corner* thus rejects the hood films' way of trying to achieve the same ends; to engender viewers' sympathy with the characters on screen living in poor, predominantly black neighborhoods. *The Corner* suggests that *Boyz n the Hood*—and other hood films—take some aesthetic missteps in their way of trying to achieve their political purpose. In contrast, *The Corner* focuses on showing—through the use of flashbacks—how the then-current state of affairs is a product of a social decline and thus make the viewer understand that the situation in these blighted inner-city neighborhoods is not to be taken as a given; this situation is shown to be a resultant of a permeable historical development and *The Corner* thus stresses that we need the diachronic perspective to understand the current situation. As such, the flashbacks and the intertextual dialogues underscore and qualify the overall purpose of *The Corner*; the simultaneous application of realist and melodramatic modes needed to humanize its characters which, in turn, might make the viewer reject other media discourses that does not do any favors to the public image of dwellers of inner-city neighborhoods. This speaks to the dual purpose inherent in *The Corner's* humanization which contains both a *discursive* and an *extra-discursive* dimension; i.e. one that aims at

language and one that addresses social realities. To understand *The Corner* is to acknowledge both elements in its societal criticism as its ambition is to serve as a counter-narrative to other narratives that overlook the social realities *The Corner* centers on. This discursive—and pathos laden—criticism ultimately aims at addressing the untoward social conditions under which this group of people lives.

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## NOTES

1. *The Wire* is the subject of five monographs (Vint 2013, Lavik 2014, Williams 2014, Kelleter 2014, Corkin 2017), five edited collections (Potter and Marshall 2009, Bzdak et al 2013, Dillon and Crommey 2015, Keeble and Stacy 2015, and special issues of the journals of *Criticism*, *Critical Inquiry*, and *Darkmatter*). *Treme* is the topic of one monograph (Andersen 2018), one anthology (Gendrin et al 2017), and a special issue of *Television & New Media*.

2. Ed Burns was one of the principal writers on *The Wire* but was not involved in creating *The Corner*, apart from the fact that the miniseries was based on the book penned by him and Simon.

3. See Vint 1, 15, 21, 43, 87; Kelleter 29, 43, 64-65; Williams, *On The Wire* 24-28, 38-44, 52-53, 68, 75, 241; Lavik, *The Wire* 87, 111, 112, 216, 225; and Corkin 5, 7, 23, 30-32, 85.

4. Simon had learned the craft of writing television drama by working on *Homicide: Life on the Street* which was based on Simon's book *Homicide: A Year on the Killing Streets* (1991). As Tom Fontana served as the showrunner on that series, however, *The Corner* represents the first time that Simon was a central writer and producer on a show.

5. Several television series had, of course, featured predominantly black casts, but not serials. Prominent examples include *Good Times* (1974-1979, CBS), *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985, CBS), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992, NBC), *Family Matters* (1989-1998, ABC/CBS), *Roc* (1991-1994, Fox), and *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (1990-1996, NBC).

6. Dutton said he did not want any of the writers present for the shooting of this opening scene and according to Janny Scott "HBO asked Mr. Dutton at the last minute to film a personal preamble to the series, describing his reasons for making it. The idea worried Mr. Simon and Mr.

Mills; they did not want HBO apologizing for the series in advance. They shipped a draft script to Mr. Dutton. But he sent back a message saying he would write the preamble himself" (Scott).

7. Interestingly, *The Wire* was since criticized for not portraying the positive work of social workers in the Baltimore communities it centers on. In Peter Dreier and John Atlas' much cited critique of *The Wire*, they write that "*The Wire's* unrelentingly bleak portrayal missed what's hopeful in Baltimore and, indeed, in other major American cities" (Dreier and Atlas 330). Erlend Lavik, however, counters that critique, writing that that argument is like criticizing a fire alarm for being too noisy (Lavik, *The Wire* 142). There is, in other words, an argumentative purpose to *The Wire's* "bleak" picture of Baltimore (Jensen). So in considering in the positive work Miss Ella does in her community, we can see that the criticism of Simon's shows might be challenged if one looks at how his serials depict America's urban realities in different ways.

8. Given that Murray Smith's work in viewer engagement is based in a *cognitivist* interest, some might see his ideas as gelling poorly with a *cultural* approach such as this article's interest in how *The Corner* engages in historical debates about drug addicts in inner cities. Mittell, however, argues that while the "cognitive poetic approach" excels at answering specific questions about viewer engagement, this agenda is compatible with cultural approaches that take on other research agendas (205).

## ABSTRACTS

This article presents a reading of the six-part HBO miniseries *The Corner* (2000) which was co-written by David Simon and David Mills and directed by Charles S. Dutton. Focusing in particular on its use of flashbacks, intertextuality, melodrama, and realism, the article argues that this series has its chief interest in humanizing a group of people—namely drug addicts—who otherwise are relegated to the margins of popular television shows. Taking a point of departure in showing how a family in an impoverished neighborhood is afflicted by drug addiction, *The Corner* tries to counter existing discourses about people living in blighted inner-city neighborhoods, and through intertextual dialogue with the genre of the "hood film"—exemplified by John Singleton's *Boyz n the Hood* (1991)—*The Corner* explicitly makes a different depiction of similar subject matters than is generally found in "hood films." The article shows how *The Corner's* societal critique is embedded in both realism and melodrama as a way of insisting on the veracity of its subject matter while also using emotionality—pathos—as a core part of its appeal and political argumentation.

## INDEX

**Keywords:** *The Corner*, David Simon, humanization, drug abuse, melodrama, intertextual dialogue



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